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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### HARMONY OF DUALITIES IN HERMAN HESSE'S STEPPENWOLF

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#### Abstract

The personal life of the German- Swiss Nobel Laureate Herman Hesse (1877 – 1962) can be regarded as a period of crises, aggression, depression, cultural pre-conditioning and dogmatism. Despite his pietistic upbringing, he suffered adversities, resulting into mental trauma, emotional turbulence and inconsolable disgrace. These unpleasant experiences caused extreme depression and he had to receive Jungian psychoanalysis from Dr. Lang and Dr. Jung. This refuge in psychoanalysis brought him solace. Pietism, once a pain, became a life-long support for his spiritual journey and literary yearnings. He was, however, diagnosed with bipolar-II disorder due to his intense mood shifts, the factors being ambivalence, guilt, aggression and sexual conflict. The current work is an attempt to exemplify the impact of this disorder in his novels with special reference to his cult classic *Steppenwolf*, wherein the protagonist Harry Haller portrays the dichotomy of the personality, being split between a human being and a wolf. This novel which was published in 1927 is a complex, philosophical novel and deals with the themes like identity crisis, duality of human nature and quest for a meaningful life, to ultimately attain spiritual transcendence and harmony of dualities.

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#### Introduction:-

The novel *Steppenwolf* by the Swiss-German writer Herman Hesse deals with such crisis in life wherein there is division not only in the society but also within the self. This novel which was published in 1927 is a complex, philosophical novel and deals with the themes like identity crisis and quest for a meaningful life, to ultimately attain spiritual transcendence. In a nutshell, internal conflict is the major theme in *Steppenwolf*. As the title of the novel suggests, the protagonist finds himself divided into two halves- the man and the wolf. On one hand he is bound to conform to the societal norms and live as a bourgeois bachelor but on the other hand his wolfish nature provokes him to break free from the social conventions and live freely like a wolf.

If we reflect on the life of Herman Hesse, we find that his mid- life was a period of crisis due to many untoward happenings. The mental conflict and emotional turmoil he had undergone, reflects in his novels. He constantly was in search of the essence and true meaning of life and we find these themes, pertaining

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to self- analysis and introspection, resonate in all his major novels, from Peter Camenzind (1904) to his last novel *The Glass Bead Game* (1943). His novels are a kind of self-portrait. Mentioning about *Steppenwolf*, Jayesh Kachot in his article ‘The Internal Conflict between the Body and the Soul in Hermann Hesse’s the *Steppenwolf*’ writes:

*Steppenwolf* is a poetical self-portrait of a man who felt himself to be half-human and half-wolf. This fault like and magical story is evidence of Hesse's searching philosophy and extraordinary sense of humanity as he tells of the humanization of a middle aged misanthrope. Yet this novel can be seen as a plea for rigorous self-examination and an indictment of intellectual hypocrisy of the period. (4)

The *Steppenwolf* is more or less the portrayal of the life of Herman Hesse but it somehow cannot be placed in the category of an autobiographical novel as Hesse does not directly share the account of his life here. However, reading the novel in the light of his personal life and experiences, we definitely would find the influence of his life in the novel. Out of despair and despondence emerged a new genre of writing which focussed on ‘self’ and ‘honest confession’. ‘Journey towards the self’ has been the theme of all the major novels of Herman Hesse, with ‘himself’ as the subject, transformed into his leading characters or protagonists. Eugene Stelzig in his work “Herman Hesse’s Fictions of the Self, “writes:

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From first to last Hesse was a fabulator who wrote himself with single-minded zeal: his narratives are seriated self-inventions, or, to borrow Hazlitt’s witticism about Rousseau, in all his writings he never once lost sight of himself. While Hesse’s critics have observed that, like Goethe, he wrote fragments of a greater confession (26).

The protagonist in the story, Harry Haller, is a victim of dual personality- half human and half wolf. This kind of division within himself and in the society alienates him from the society and he suffers isolation. But the fact remains that being a social animal he also has a wish to mingle with others and being loved by them. As mentioned in the novel *Steppenwolf*, "Harry wished, as every sentient being does, to be loved as a whole". (25). The story which is in three sections raises many philosophical, psychological and existential questions. The first section introduces us to the protagonist Harry Haller who finds himself split into two personalities: a refined intellectual and a solitary wolf of the steppes. Being torn between two personalities, he suffers existential crisis and decides to embark on a journey of transformation, for a meaningful life. In the second section this determination is triggered with his encounter with various characters in the magic theatre. This is a symbolic, metaphorical theatre, which rewinds the episodes of his life and he is able to retrospect and introspect. This transcendental journey encourages him to investigate his inner self and psyche to find the answers, pertaining to his perception of life and reality. As a result of this introspective journey, he is able to realize the fact that he has the power to transform his life. He, eventually, understands the essence of life and accepts his dual nature. The realization dawns on him that to experience life in its entirety, one needs to accept both the positive as well as negative aspects of life. This discernment resolves his inner conflicts and ensures the harmony of dualities.

The *Steppenwolf* conveys the message of the strengthening of the soul and it guides towards a profound understanding of life for which the prerequisite is the elimination of ‘ego’. The insights shared by Herman Hesse are based on his experiences and the wisdom he gained through those experiences which were full of challenges and contradictions. The key elements which Herman Hesse considered in his writings were soul, love, introspection, divine inspiration, nature, the realms of time and the stages of life. These elements of existence are dexterously mingled with the components that define social behaviour and the conformist issues prevalent in the society. In his personal life he endured many adversities resulting into his mental trauma and emotional disaster. Eugene L Stelzig in his work ‘The Aesthetics of Confession’: Herman Hesse’s “Crisis” poems in the context of the “*Steppenwolf*” period, mentions some lines written by Herman Hesse in a letter, “For at least a year now, I have been in the worst crisis of my life, and I still hope even now that it will not pass, but break my neck instead, because I am sick of life to the point of throwing up”(49). He had to seek refuge in psychoanalysis to overcome his extreme depression that entangled his life. He was even diagnosed with bipolar-II disorder due to his extreme aggression and intense mood shifts. The psychoanalytic treatment helped him to look within and analyse the episodes of

his life truthfully. The benefit he gained from this treatment was that he mustered the courage to turn towards himself and be honest to himself. Stelzig further writes about Hesse in his book:

In a 1918 essay on “Artists and Psychoanalysis”, he lists as one of the major benefits of analysis for the artists that it demands a “truthfulness toward oneself to which we are not accustomed”, and adds, revealingly, that such honesty “at the very outset of analysis is a powerful, indeed a monstrous experience, a shock that reaches to the root of one’s being”.(57)

The novel has many themes like quest for self, essence of life, transcendental awakening and spiritual solace. These are the common themes in his novels and we can easily comprehend them in the light of his attitude and thematic approach, if we reflect on his family background and upbringing. He was born to pietist parents with a very religious and pious upbringing. His parents and maternal grandfather were missionaries in India. They read Hindu scriptures and texts. These initial influences had a great impact on Herman Hesse, as a boy and he grew up to be very sensitive to all these. His early confrontation with Indian culture and tradition lead to his lifelong association with this country. Considering this fact, we can relate the thematic approach in his major novels, including *The Steppenwolf*, with the the Eastern concepts of Hinduism and Buddhism.

There are many other aspects in the novel which reflect the influence of Hindu Vedanta philosophy and Advaita philosophy which awaken us to look within the ‘Self’ and accept the duality. In the story when Harry Haller is troubled with the existence of dual personalities within himself, then the musician Pablo, who acts as his mentor, guides him to look within himself to find the other reality, he is longing for. He says:

You know, of course, where this other world lies hidden. It is the world of your own soul that you seek. Only within yourself exists that other reality for which you long. I can give you nothing that has not already its being within yourself. I can throw open to you no picture gallery but your own soul. All I can give you is the opportunity, the impulse, the key. I can help you to make your own world visible. That is all. (82)

‘Knowing Thyself’ is the essence of Hindu Vedanta philosophy. The concept of inward journey in order to experience union with the ‘One’ (God) is a fundamental aspect in the Hindu scriptures and especially the Advaita Vedanta. The Vedantists believe that there is just ‘One real’ being and ‘that are you’. They go on to supply a formula to it, *Tat Tvam Asi*, which means *Thou Art That*. The only interest of Herman Hesse, as his novels depict, is the search for ‘self’ and to find answer to the existential questions ‘who am I?’ and ‘what am I?’ In this quest he finds the answer in the exploration of the ‘self’, which resonates with the concept of the Vedanta philosophy as mentioned in the above lines. He even goes to an extent of making use of the formula *Tat Twam Asi* (8) in the novel ‘*The Steppenwolf*’. James Edgar Carnahan in his work ‘*Hermann Hesse and Vedanta*

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Philosophy: A Discussion of the Correlation Between the Basic Themes in the Later Novels of Hermann Hesse and the Traditional Philosophy of India” affirms:

Hesse's search is for the true self, that which lies within and which is hidden by our bodies and minds. Hesse was an untiring seeker after this elusive self, or soul, all his life. His writings are an accurate reflection of his internal journey towards himself. In the viewpoint of traditional Indian thought or philosophy, Hesse's search is readily understandable. In India, there is a time-honored tradition of the aspiring seeker who dedicates himself or herself to the long hunt for the self, that within us which is eternal and unchanging. (1)

The major theme in the novel in context is ‘internal conflict’ which is resolved with the understanding of life and searching of the soul. This understanding can be achieved only after enduring the trials and

tribulations and through inner exploration. At the end of the novel we find that Harry Haller wins the battle between the wolf and the man within him and is successful in uniting them into a single whole 'One', with a greater wisdom and discernment. The story finally concludes with the optimistic words of Harry, 'Oh now I understood everything'. (237). In 'Journal of Positive School Psychology' Sahil Kumar in his "Works of Herman Hesse :A Quest for Spirituality" says:

Hermann Hesse's novels were always about soul searching and finding the true meaning of life which began with his visit to India, followed by the finishing of his one book to another, where all explored an individual's search for genuineness, self-knowledge, and spirituality.

The novel thus ends with a hopeful message that Harry comes to terms with life and is able to maintain an equilibrium; balancing the opposites. He experiences an unmatched sense of satisfaction when he achieves an understanding of himself and finds his position and place in the world. This work of Herman Hesse makes us aware of the fact that this journey of self-discovery and self-exploration is very complicated and is full of inner conflicts and outer influences but at the same time the end result is very gratifying and harmonious with the knowledge and understanding of the 'self'.

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